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The Synagogue Pulpit

A JEWISH CONFERENCE OR CONGRESS:

WHICH AND WHY?

BY

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NEX

A Jewish Conference or Congress:

Which and Why?

The matter of a Jewish Conference or Congress is not one that has heretofore been unknown within the life of Israel. He little understands the breadth and depth of the currents of Jewish life, who imagines that the movement in behalf of a truly democratic organization of Israel has been artificially stimulated or has, in the unhappy phrase of them that do not know, been exploited in furtherance of a particular policy or faction.

The Jewish Congress movement is as far from being new as it is from being stimulated. The movement has sprung out of the soul of the people and is not "of today nor yet of yesterday." For years the tendency has been developing, though it be true that another decade or even generation might have passed before the movement would have gained sufficient momentum to have reached its present status of expression, had it not been for the war with all its tidal effects upon life. When after decades the history of the entire movement will be written, it will be seen, I venture to prophecy, that they, who are now falsely charged with having

fostered agitation and engendered strife within Jewish ranks, have exercised a finely restraining influence upon the masses, stirred as never before by a deep interest in the outcome of the present war as it is for good or evil to affect the fortunes of Israel.

Little do they understand the spirit of Israel, poorly in truth are they able to encompass what might be styled Jewish psychology, who delude themselves with the imagining that this genuine and deep-felt movement is nothing more than a passing gust, that after a while the newly awakened energy will have spent itself and again leave things as chaotic and unorganized as they were before. Nor is such division as seems to have come to pass in the life of Israel wholly undesirable as long as the differences be held upon a high and impersonal plane. As long as acrimony have no part in the division, it cannot be unwholesome frankly and freely to consider certain fundamental differences that have come to light with respect to the meeting of Jewish problems within and without American Israel. Better almost the heat of strife than the ice of indifference, better it might almost be said honest blundering and mistakes than the unimpeachable precision of the undertaker.

Surely it should not be necessary to point out that none save the most compelling of reasons could have moved any group of loyal Jews in these days even to seem to lend themselves to the spirit of divisiveness at a time when unity of purpose and action is imperatively needed if great Jewish interests are greatly to be served. It is in truth in

the very interest of the unity, which seems threatened for a moment only that it may be conserved for all the future, that we lift up our voices, knowing that if the spirit that is now dominant among us remain unchallenged the very soul of Israel will be menaced.

The demand for a Jewish Congress is impersonal and objective. The personal emphasis is imported into the treatment of the question by those who act as if their personal domains were being invaded, as if some rashly venturesome intruder were violating the sanctity of their private possessions. It is our duty to point out that we who believe that the summoning of a Jewish Congress is the next step in the conduct of Jewish affairs, have no personal quarrel with them from whom we have found ourselves under the regrettable necessity of differing fundamentally. We have the utmost respect for their judgment and their good-will and we mean to continue to respect them as long as they will suffer us so to do. But one cannot help deploring the spirit of resentment which has met the efforts of those men, who have sought earnestly and for the first time to effect a democratic organization of the Jewish people in this land. The very resentment of the attempt of the masses to assume the control of their own affairs is proof of the anti-democratic spirit that has come over those good men, who do not seem to understand, let alone to share, the passion of a people to direct their own affairs.

No one, as far as I know, has questioned either the integrity or the competence of the men who by the accident of fortune or by their own will or be-

cause, at best, of record of service, stand out as the leaders of Israel. Nor am I unmindful of the fact that the servants of these gentlemen, scribbling in an hired press or screeching in some just as truly hired pulpits, will cry out against any man who dares to speak the truth, however objectively, touching the mighty. It is time that our leaders and all men come to understand the difference between personal attack on the one hand to which none of us has stooped and impersonal, objective criticism. One were tempted to insist that democracy rests upon criticism if one could bring one's self to believe that the utterance of this truth would lead to a less inhospitable attitude toward criticism.

Touching the men bitterly opposed to the convening of a representative Jewish assembly be it said again that neither their benevolence of spirit nor their wisdom of action has been called into question. We grant the integrity of their purpose and the competence of their service, but we insist that, however well-meaning and admirable they may be, no small, self-chosen group of men possesses the right to think and speak and act for multitudes, whose express mandate they do not bear nor have even sought to obtain.

Nothing could be more unjust than to seek to convey the impression, as has been done, that the Congress-Conference dispute is a quarrel of a single man with a group of men whose leadership of American Israel he is seeking to wrest from their hands. The question that faces American Israel would have been raised if this figure had never been. Happily, however, in the revolt of the masses against

Jewish bureaucracy, against the un-Jewish spirit of feudalism, against what Professor Horace Kallen has rightly called Jewish mediaevalism, we follow the inspiring leadership of one, who embodies within his personality much that is finest in Israel and as much more that is finest in Americanism.

The truth is that the men who have been good enough to charge themselves with the personal conduct of American Jewish affairs are, I hope for their own sake, big enough to be forbearing with respect to that which is at worst nothing more than a question respecting the adequacy of any group of men to serve as the unchallenged masters of Israel. These men rightly understand that the fundamental question revolves around the right of any self-chosen group of men, however admirable, to act for multitudes without mandate on the one hand and without even having taken counsel with them on the other. These men rightly understand that there is a mighty issue at stake in this critical hour, which at last finds the people resolved to rise to the dignity of self-mastery and self-determination. The beginning of the end of the old regime in American Israel of undisputed and autocratic control of the few over the affairs of multitudes is at hand.

Much of the evil of the present regime in American Israel is due to the circumstance tolerated nowhere else and by no other people that our philanthropists are our statesmen and our statesmen are our philanthropists. We have too little statesmanship in our philanthropy and we have too much pseudo-philanthropy in our statesmanship. A des-

potism is not less intolerable because it is tempered and moderated by benevolence or shall we not rather say that we are absolutely intolerant of despotism plus a temperate and tepid benevolence. It may be difficult for some men to understand, but it is none the less true, that the life of a people cannot be organized upon the basis of the methods of charity nor yet in the spirit of philanthropy, however real and vast. Men may be the most generous of philanthropists or the most competent of almoners, still are we as a people unwilling to suffer our fortunes and our destinies to be decided by any group of men who will not meet nor deign to hold counsel with the people whom they purport to represent.

The question of Conference or Congress is far from being academic in character. Consistently enough they who oppose the summoning of a Jewish Congress are prepared to repeat the very grave mistake of one year ago when a conference was called out of which grew the American Jewish Relief Committee, which is but another name for the American Jewish Committee. This conference was called without having previously invited the co-operation of other important nation-wide Jewish bodies which, unlike the American Jewish Committee, are democratically chosen and completely representative in respect of their leadership.

No hair-splitting can set this matter right and no hired scribblers, however vociferous their defence and voluble their vituperation, can justify the arbitrary action of one year ago, the result of which has been that little more than one million dollars

has been secured for the war sufferers instead of a sum five or ten times as large which would, in my own judgment, have been secured if from the beginning the matter had been taken in hand not by one limited, self-chosen group but had been made through the leadership and with the co-operation of all the national Jewish bodies, the affair of all American Israel. Nor was there any such generosity on the part of the self-named leaders as served to stimulate and to compel giving upon an adequate scale. In the field of charity, a want of zeal and industry in leadership is excusable only upon the condition, rarely enough met, that personal responsibility be assumed for the results which otherwise these qualities alone can ensure.

The question is whether American Israel is to be Jewish and American or whether, unworthy alike of its ancient heritage and its newly acquired spirit, it is to be un-Jewish and un-American. For un-Jewish it is to be distrustful and even fearful of the many; un-American it is to dread to summon the collective spirit of a people to an attitude of high self-reliance. Putting it somewhat differently, it is alike a Jewish issue and an American issue which is at stake. One of the first articles of the Jewish faith is not to surrender one's judgment even to princes and an equally binding precept upon the soul of Israel it has ever been not to separate one's self from nor to be fearful of the mass of the people.

In one word, the Jewish masses are determined at all costs to be the masters of their own fate. The Jewish people which in a very high sense has found itself, which has suffered an awakening within the

past decades, the soul of which has verily been transfigured by its newly gained spirit of self-determination, is no longer satisfied to beg at the doors of parliaments or the gates of palaces. Being too proud to beg at the doors of strangers, least of all will it stoop to have its fate moulded by the will of any number of men unless these give proof that they are at one with it, unless these have shared in the resurrection of Israel's spirit.

If there be any question in the minds of men with respect to the methods employed by those who have taken it upon themselves to call a Conference rather than a Congress, it needs but be pointed out that a small committee, which admits that it is self-constituted, has called a Conference expected to prove representative of American Israel. This Conference has been called upon the following terms and under the following conditions. A still smaller group named by a small, self-appointed body has predetermined what bodies should be invited to send representatives to the Conference, so that it has assumed the power of naming the membership of the Conference. In the next place, it predetermined what should be the subjects to be considered at such a Conference, which involves an inhibition with respect to any other subject which those in attendance at the Conference might wish to submit to its consideration. In the third place, it predetermined that the proceedings of the Conference should be secret in character, which decision,—and this is the least of the resultant disadvantages,—denies to American Israel any control over the character of the proceedings.

The spirit of the leaders who have planned the Washington Conference was frankly expressed by one of their representatives one year ago when, in reply to a protest touching the undemocratic character of a certain proposal, he declared in substance that it was immaterial whether the character of the proceedings seemed despotic or not as long as the thing had to be done and done quickly. And this observation was made admittedly with the best of motives, in ignorance of the truth that it is impossible to have things worth while done by the masses of the people if undemocratic and even despotic methods are imposed upon them.

It may well be urged that there are serious difficulties which are involved in such an undertaking as the organizing of the widely scattered elements and the widely differing factions of American Israel. We are not unmindful of the difficulties which are bound up with any attempt to set in motion the machinery out of which is to come a truly and completely democratic Congress. We would neither underrate nor understate these difficulties, but we do the gentlemen who assume them to be insuperable the honor of believing that the task would not be beyond their powers if but it were not counter to their will. Insuperable alone is their reluctance to meet the difficulties which, though heavy, are much exaggerated in the interest of a policy they seem to serve.

The citing of the difficulties which are clearly bound up with the massive task of organizing American Israel should not blind us to the circumstance that Conference and Congress respectively

represent two ideals utterly at variance though, it may be hoped, not irreconcilable. Neither Conference nor Congress is an end in itself, each being sought as means alone. The differences which have arisen between the advocates of the Congress on the one hand and the Conference on the other are not bound up with opinions touching machinery or agencies. If, after they have been properly and adequately consulted, the people should determine that a Conference, however small numerically, would suffice for the consideration of Jewish questions on their behalf, in the spirit of democracy we would bow to that will.

The Congress movement does not revolve around questions of policy but of polity, not of method but of matter, not of machinery but of principles. In truth of principle, for deep and irrevocable principles are at stake which we believe it would be false on our part to the spirit of Israel and America to suffer to be abated even for a moment! Of principle in truth, for the Jewish Congress movement expresses in unmistakable terms the will of the Jewish people to suffer no group of men whom they have not named to determine, it may be for generations, the content of Jewish destiny!

The Jewish Congress movement places itself on record as unalterably opposed to the methods of secrecy determined upon for the Washington Conference. Privileges must be sought in secret: rights may be demanded in the open. We have nothing to conceal either from ourselves or from the peoples of the earth, nor can wide and popular support, which surely is indispensable, be secured for any

undertakings on behalf of the people as long as these are made to feel that they are not trusted by their self-appointed elders. As for the peril of the unwisdom and the blundering which are said to be certain to result from a public Congress, I would say that not even the privilege of unwisdom and folly ought to be monopolized by a self-elected few.

Enlightened thinkers in all warring and even neutral lands are contending as never before for the open and democratic control of their own affairs, foreign as well as domestic, international as well as intranational. Safe it is to predicate that we shall not have an end of thrice-damned war until the reign of the secret conduct of international affairs has been brought to an end. Why, then, when the peoples of earth are insisting upon a completely democratic control of their affairs, which cannot be until the reign of secret diplomatic negotiations is ended, are we to proclaim that we are believers in the policy of secrecy? We should have none of it in Jewish affairs because Jewish affairs can bear the light of day. We ask for no rights of which the world may not know: we know of no right which we ought not frankly and openly ask of the nations if by them it is of right to be accorded to us.

They who imagine that a privately called, secretly held Conference will be adequately representative of the common will and united purpose of the Jewish people must needs remember that Israel may sin against itself if it will to omit to do the things needed to safeguard our rights, but no man or men, though ready to serve as trustees and guardians for Israel, may do these things or omit to do them

without Israel's assent. In other words, Israel may if it will commit moral and spiritual suicide but no one, however powerful or circumstanced or privileged, has the right at this time of all times in Jewish history to assume an attitude of despotic control, however benevolent, over the fortunes of an entire people.

Let us remember, too, the year and the conjuncture of circumstances. We are far removed from 1878, the year of the last great international Congress. We have learned much in the nearly forty years that have passed, and we have suffered much. Nor should we as a people be satisfied with such an issue of the prospective peace negotiations as rejoiced the hearts of our fathers in 1878. Thus in the despite of much that is infinitely saddening, the Russian people have gone forward with unprecedented stride and, moreover there are indisputable grounds for insistence upon equality of rights for the Jewish people throughout Russia. For one thing, there has been the astonishing political advance of the Empire though this has been achieved in the very teeth of bureaucratic opposition. Again, since the beginning of the Great War, the Jew has served the Russian Empire in its armies and this heroic service has come from a people from whom the Russian government deserved little save unforbearing hatred. Again, it should be made to tell in behalf of Israel's fortunes that Russia and her Western allies are purporting to wage war on behalf of the rights of the lesser peoples and nationalities. Finally, the allied powers may, and if needs be, must bring resistless pressure to bear upon the Rus-

sian government in the event of its failure willingly to accord complete rights to its Jewish people. In Roumania, too, alone of the Balkan States, Israel has been ruthlessly betrayed since Disraeli pleaded on behalf of his people at Berlin, and we are resolved that insofar as in us lies there shall be no repetition of this cruel betrayal of a people's hopes and a people's rights.

It is safe to say that the gentlemen who advocate that a Conference rather than a Congress be held, imagining that such a Conference would be adequately representative of the common will and united purpose of the Jewish people, that those gentlemen who are willing to assume the responsibility of trusteeship for Israel will or would safeguard every interest which we deem precious, but they are not free to do so, neither are they free to omit to do so unless they rest under the unequivocal command of the Jewish communities of America.

Touching the question of the Jewish resettlement of Asiatic Turkey or Palestine, Israel must speak for itself and none can speak for it save with its express mandate and authority. We shall not be satisfied to have an end of the long-continuing reign of curtailment of privilege in Palestine. By the token of forty years of the sweat of toil and the blood of consecration, the Jews of the world may and of right ought to demand that which Turkey knows we have sought for a generation and more, for we have sought it frankly that all men might know,—namely, that the growing dominance of Jewish life in Palestine be acknowledged and accepted not only by the government sovereign in

Asiatic Turkey but by all the nations of earth. It is known of men that we do not seek more than our lawful rights in Palestine, but we believe that those lawful rights within Palestine must, with perfect loyalty to any government or governments which are hereafter to control its destinies, include the autonomy of the Jewish resettlement. Moreover, this local or provincial autonomy must be secured and safeguarded irrespective of the circumstance that some of us believe that Palestine is not only the most desirable door of refuge through which Jewish exiles can enter but potentially the centre of such a renaissance of the Jewish spirit as may under God give rebirth to all the House of Israel.

A deep and solemn issue is at stake. The question is whether Jewish problems are to be considered by American Jews at a Conference under the terms already mentioned or whether these problems are to be met at a Congress democratically chosen and truly representative and faced in such a spirit withal as would represent the soul of Israel. If a small, self-appointed group do not trust the people sufficiently to risk summoning their representatives together in earnest and solemn conference, who will dare maintain that their deliberations and actions, however wise and well-wishing, will represent the purpose of the people.

It has truly been said of them who seem to shrink in terror from the summoning of a Jewish Congress that they know all of Israel save Israel's soul. They know that the Jew has a body and they are willing to feed and to clothe it. But are they not in danger of forgetting that the Jew is some-

thing more? Do they remember that he who sets himself up as a leader in Israel dare not forget that the Jew is a soul, that this soul must be reckoned with and that truly great alone in Israel is Israel's soul. To them that do not understand what mighty issues are involved it is a duty to point out that nothing in a generation, perhaps in generations, has been a happier omen of the dawning of a new day for Israel than the battle within the Holy Land less than two years ago against, I had almost said, the powers and principalities on behalf of the principle of Jewish self-reverence, which battle has passed into Jewish history under the name of the Hebrew Language dispute.

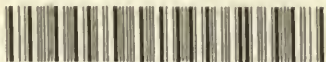
The demand of the American Jew for a Jewish Congress is another sign that the ghetto no longer rules the soul of the Jewish masses. Israel, alas, did not lose the habit of the ghetto when the walls of brick and stone were razed to the ground. The temper of the ghetto still abides in the soul of many Jews who fancy themselves emancipated, for many so-called emancipated Jews are voluntary ghettoites. Too many Hofjuden are nothing more than half-Juden. They have emancipated themselves *from* rather than *unto* perfect freedom.

Earnestly do I appeal to my fellow-Jews for a reconsideration of the question, which is not yet closed. Let them remember that it is better to fall short or to fail in striving for the highest, as said Cavour, than to be content with the corroding prosperity of a system admittedly inferior. Let them that urge the secret sessions of a few rather than the open counsel of the many remember that "better

the worst of chambers than the best of ante-chambers."

It is not a sign of greatness but a token of littleness, it is not a sign of vision but a token of vulgarity to insist upon the superimposition of one's own will upon a whole community. But the arrogance of the few is a little thing by the side of the supineness of the many if the many suffer themselves to lapse into the degradation of uncomplaining and unchallenging acquiescence in the will of the few. To these gentlemen who are opposed to a Jewish Congress, I would say that if they love Israel as I believe they do, if they would truly serve Israel, as I am persuaded that they would, let them rejoice in the new token of Israel's reborn strength that comes to light in the demand of the people that they be heard in the determining of their own destinies.

For a generation, the older Jewish settlers in America have urged the newer that they must take their affairs into their own hands, that they must cease to be dependent upon the purse or the judgment or the will of others, that, by the side of the earlier groups, they, too, must become self-determining units in the body of Israel. The hour is come to test the genuineness of the appeal of decades to the people to express themselves, to rule themselves, to serve themselves. If God wishes to save Israel, He will save Israel with or without our help. But let us strive with all wisdom and all the light that God gives us to the end that we may be of them that help not hinder God, that we may be of them that help not hinder the will of Israel to be greatly free and nobly self-determining.



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